

# The Soviet Role in Asia

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*Following is a statement by William A. Brown, Deputy Assistant Secretary for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, before the Subcommittees on Europe and the Middle East and on Asian and Pacific Affairs of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, October 19, 1983.*

The Administration welcomes this opportunity to testify today before the House Subcommittees on Europe and the Middle East and on Asian and Pacific Affairs concerning the Soviet role in Asia. Only a handful of issues has as high a priority in our foreign policy, or indeed in that of the Soviets, as events in this broad arc of nations stretching from the Pacific Ocean to the Persian Gulf. The region is of rapidly increasing importance to both East and West in terms of security, trade, and political development.

## **Soviet Foreign Policy Style**

Soviet policy toward this vast area comprehends a diverse mixture of ethnic, religious, cultural, and political patterns and is itself diverse. And although it would be difficult to identify a unified Soviet perspective or strategy for the entire region, we can speak of a distinct Soviet style in handling problems which arise here, and indeed everywhere, when the U.S.S.R. perceives its interests are engaged.

A few weeks ago this style was revealed with a clarity rarely seen in international affairs. Once in a very great while an event will occur which cuts

through all ambiguities and provides the world with an unvarnished view of a state's motivations and essential character. The tragedy of Korean Air Lines (KAL) flight #007 was such an event. This incident is striking because it symbolizes, at one stroke, so much that is wrong about the character of Soviet policy toward its Asian neighbors—the heavy emphasis on military intimidation, the easy resort to force, the absence of any sense of trust, the inability to communicate, and the paranoia that exists just below the surface of an unconvincing rhetoric of peace and good will.

It also highlights a continuing Soviet frustration: Moscow's inability to convert its impressive and growing military presence in Asia and the Pacific and Indian Oceans into a coherent role in a regional community through which the Soviets could project their political and economic influence. (Only in India can Soviet nonmilitary diplomacy be said to be really effective.) In a sense, Soviet reliance on military power and use of force is undermining these broader goals and making it more, rather than less, difficult for the U.S.S.R. to achieve the status and influence in Asia which it so clearly desires.

This failure is serious because it is clear that the Soviets assign Asia a priority in their foreign policy second only to Europe and are devoting increasing resources of every kind to consolidate the U.S.S.R.'s position as an Asian power.

Soviet diplomatic weakness in Asia has been accompanied, however, by an unprecedented military buildup aimed at

the United States and its friends and allies. The U.S.S.R. can now rapidly deploy large naval and air forces throughout the Pacific and Indian Oceans, which for the first time pose a significant direct conventional threat to U.S. forces, facilities, and lines of communication and supply. So while we should not assess the U.S.S.R.'s position in Asia without noting the very real problems Moscow faces, we cannot afford to be complacent, especially given the impressive power it can deploy in the region.

Asia is important to the Soviets for several reasons. Three-quarters of the U.S.S.R. is in Asia, and one-third of the Asian landmass is Soviet territory. Some 50 million people, or about 20% of the Soviet population, are Asian. And a major thrust of Russian history for the last several centuries has been the expansion of the Russian, and then the Soviet, empire to the East. Today, much of the hope for improving the Soviet economy depends upon tapping the rich mineral and energy resources of the Soviet Far East. In addition, ideology and nationalism impel a Soviet assertiveness in Asia as elsewhere, as well as a more general striving, as one high Soviet official has put it, to see that no problem, anywhere, can be solved without Soviet participation.

Moreover, the Soviets realize that their presence in Asia is inseparable from their global strategic position. They remain aware of the possibility that, in a general conflict, the Soviet Union might have to fight a two-front war. Thus, the Soviets seek a military presence in Asia to intimidate all possible opponents. Besides matching or surpassing U.S. military capabilities in the area, Moscow strives to deter China from becoming a major military power, especially one closely linked to the industrial democracies. It seeks as well to discourage Japanese self-defense efforts and to weaken Tokyo's alliance with the United States and growing ties with China. Its greatest concern is that these three nations might be developing a pattern of cooperation on security issues which will isolate the U.S.S.R. in a permanently disadvantageous military position in Northeast Asia.

In other parts of Asia—where their security concerns are not quite as acute as they are in Northeast Asia—the Soviets nevertheless have attempted to create conditions unfavorable to the development of political and economic arrangements which they cannot dominate or control. Given its tendency to apply manipulative solutions to such problems, Moscow has generally fol-

lowed an opportunistic strategy of maintaining and exploiting local tensions, projecting influence through supplies of arms and military advisers, and expanding its own direct military presence.

The Soviets have played upon Sino-Vietnamese differences, for example, to install themselves in Indochina. ASEAN [Association of South East Asian Nations] efforts to achieve a political settlement in Kampuchea have been met with intimidation. They have exploited Indo-Pakistani tensions, and the war between Iran and Iraq as well, to expand their influence in New Delhi and Baghdad through arms supply relationships. And Moscow has acted with direct armed force in neighboring Afghanistan in an effort to achieve the dominance and control it desires.

### Soviet Weaknesses

But despite the heavy commitment of military resources to the region, the Soviets must be disappointed with the overall results. For this reliance on armed force has only thrown Soviet weaknesses into vivid relief. The truth is that a growing stress on Soviet military capabilities has been matched by the atrophy of political and economic instruments of foreign policy. Soviet trading relationships with Asian countries have declined in the last two decades: Moscow's share of total Japanese trade is proportionally less now than it was in 1960, and Sino-Soviet trade is drastically reduced from the 1960 level, despite a recent upturn.

Politically, the Soviet Union has never achieved the influence it held in Asia during the 1950s, when both China and North Korea were pro-Soviet and pliant and anti-Western feeling in the aftermath of colonialism was running at high tide. Since then, China has been transformed into an adversary cultivating ties with the West; Japan has become a major bulwark of the Western economic system and has deepened its political and security relationships with the United States; and interest in the Soviet model has practically disappeared from the region. Even North Korea has closer ties with Beijing than with Moscow and has openly criticized both the Vietnamese invasion of Kampuchea and the Soviets' own adventure in Afghanistan. Although Pyongyang belatedly gave grudging support to Moscow's position on the KAL incident, and Moscow has continued to signal its desire to improve relations with North Korea (even, initially, in the wake of the Rangoon bombing), the basic wariness in the relationship seems to have little abated.

All Soviet diplomatic initiatives—confidence-building measures, collective security schemes—are routinely met with suspicion, while Soviet diplomats themselves are expelled for espionage with embarrassing frequency from nations within the region. In all the newly independent Pacific island states, governments have refused to receive Soviet diplomatic missions. Worst of all from the Soviet perspective, Soviet efforts have totally failed in their primary objective of weakening U.S. security ties and political and economic links with Asian countries.

In all of Asia—if one excepts Moscow's Mongolian ally which is completely subordinate—only Vietnam has institutionalized its relationship with the U.S.S.R. through such actions as membership in the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance and providing the Soviets with major military bases. There is strong evidence that the Soviet success here has been achieved only because of Hanoi's profound security and economic needs. Should Hanoi eventually turn from a predominantly militaristic foreign policy, it is doubtful it would continue to choose such exclusive dependence on the U.S.S.R.

Soviet political weakness in Asia and the Pacific also results from the strength of the region's noncommunist nations and the limited number of tensions which Moscow finds to exploit there. While most Soviet Asian associates—North Korea, Vietnam, the puppet regimes in Kampuchea and Afghanistan—are isolated, locked in tense confrontations with their neighbors, and suffering from economic stagnation, the pro-Western nations of Asia have developed broad and effective diplomatic and trading relations throughout the world and enjoy, collectively, the world's most impressive record of economic growth.

Politically, Asia now has largely passed through its era of decolonization and revolution and has entered into a period when most of the nations of the region are able to maintain the sort of political stability and economic development which make them immune to the pressures the Soviets traditionally bring to bear. The impressive unity and economic achievements of the ASEAN nations are especially notable in this regard.

Moreover, Soviet use of force in other areas has given Moscow a triple liability in pursuing its adventurist policies in Asia. Heavy Soviet commitment of military assets to Afghanistan and Eastern Europe limits Moscow's ability to expend resources elsewhere. In

addition, Moscow's continued inability to work its will in places like Poland or Afghanistan brings into question all of its claims about the historical inevitability of Marxism and its ability to maintain control over present clients, much less manage new ones. Finally, Soviet militarism brings into being the very thing which it is intended to prevent: a widely shared determination to resist Soviet advances and a tendency for otherwise very disparate nations to cooperate in achieving this objective.

### The Limitations of Its Policy

Recent Soviet behavior in Asia—and, in particular, Moscow's handling of several key countries—demonstrates the limitations of its predominantly militaristic and opportunistic foreign policy.

**China and Japan.** For instance, the security imperatives of Northeast Asia mean that this area—perhaps the number one priority of Soviet policy throughout the entire region. As I stated earlier, a primary objective for Moscow is to retard the development of both Chinese and Japanese defense capabilities and to prevent any further development of U.S. security arrangements with these two countries—as dissimilar as these links are. Yet, the Soviets have undermined this very goal by their steady military buildup in Northeast Asia, the KAL shootdown, and their blatant (but so far unsuccessful) attempts to intimidate the Japanese with bristling belligerence.

The Soviets have not been totally insensitive, of course, to the uses of diplomacy in achieving their ends, but there continues to be an inability or unwillingness to follow through with their initiatives. With the Chinese, for instance, Moscow has been quick to exploit Sino-American tensions over Taiwan and internal Chinese developments to initiate formal talks on an improvement in relations. But after several sessions, Moscow apparently has still refused to move beyond atmospherics and to deal with the core problems of security and Soviet behavior the Chinese have raised. And the U.S.S.R. has not slackened its own military buildup along the Chinese borders one iota. Under such circumstances it is difficult to imagine a fundamental improvement in Sino-Soviet relations because the U.S.S.R. continues to pose such a visible security threat to the People's Republic of China. And the Chinese must know better than most what history has taught about dealing with the Soviets: attempts to reach ac-

commodation with Moscow without some counterweight to its military strength can only be bought on Soviet terms. Obviously that situation will remain an unattractive one for Beijing.

In the case of Japan—our foremost ally in Asia—Soviet intransigence over the status of the occupied northern territories, Soviet threats to make Japan a nuclear target, and the high level of abuse directed at the Nakasone administration have all tended to reinforce growing Japanese alarm about the rapid Soviet military buildup and Moscow's intentions in the region. Moscow has continued to show an interest in involving the Japanese in the economic development of Siberia but, economic considerations aside, seems not to understand that the negative climate it has created in the bilateral relationship with Tokyo destroys confidence that such economic cooperation could work.

Both China and Japan have remained unimpressed by Soviet President Andropov's recent offer not to redeploy Soviet SS-20 missiles from Europe to the Far East. The real issue, as officials of both countries have noted, remains the existing and ongoing SS-20 deployments in Asia, which the Soviets have not offered to reduce in any way and which they would be free to continue under their current INF [intermediate-range nuclear forces] proposals.

**The Korean Peninsula.** The Korean Peninsula presents a complicated situation for the Soviets. They are probably minimally satisfied for now with the status quo, inasmuch as any change could redound against Soviet interests. A renewed conflict, for instance, could bring an unwanted confrontation with the United States. Any political movement or realignment could produce a more pronounced eclipse of Soviet by Chinese influence in Pyongyang. A more powerful North Korean regime, or any Korean regime which dominated the entire peninsula, might prove more assertive and less amenable to Soviet influence. On the other hand, Moscow knows that North Korea is quickly approaching a leadership transition and that it will have to handle Pyongyang very carefully if it is not to lose ground to the Chinese who, unlike the Soviets, have already acknowledged the younger Kim as his father's successor. This, in fact, is probably behind recent Soviet gestures to improve ties with North Korea.

With regard to the Republic of Korea (R.O.K.), the Soviets realize that long-term trends indicate the growing economic and political importance of the R.O.K. in Asia. Their recent cautious ap-

proaches to Seoul—allowing Soviet journalists and cultural officials to travel there for international conferences—are an acknowledgment of Moscow's interest in developing some contacts with the south. Yet again, such subtle diplomatic gestures are vitiated, as we have seen, by the easy Soviet resort to military force in settling problems in the region.

**Vietnam.** The U.S.S.R. has used military assistance to develop its important relations with Vietnam. In fact, the relationship between the two countries is largely one of mutual military convenience. Hanoi receives support for its adventure in Kampuchea and a counter to Chinese pressure. For the Soviets, the military use of Vietnamese facilities and the diplomatic penetration of Southeast Asia they have achieved through Hanoi are of considerable strategic importance. The bases allow the Soviets not only to monitor U.S. naval and air operations in the region but also to extend Moscow's military, especially naval, reach from home bases in the Soviet Far East through Southeast Asia to the Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf. At the same time, the Soviets have been able to establish a military presence on China's southern flank and to demonstrate to other parties that the once remote U.S.S.R. is now a military force to be reckoned with throughout every corner of the region.

But there have been costs to the Soviets in Vietnam as well. Their combined aid to Hanoi now runs to \$3-\$4 million a day. Moreover, Vietnamese policies in Kampuchea have served only to unify ASEAN, strengthen its links with the West, and cause it to take on a more visible political tincture to counter Hanoi's domination of Indochina. Obviously the Soviets can try to use Vietnam to intimidate ASEAN—as a visiting ministry of foreign affairs official recently did when he hinted that ASEAN's attitude toward Hanoi could lead to Vietnamese assistance to local communist insurgencies—but so far such tactics have backfired. And if the polarization in Southeast Asia continues, Moscow may again find itself diplomatically isolated and unable to convert its substantial military assets into useful political influence with the most vital nations in the area.

**Afghanistan.** The invasion of Afghanistan and the continuing presence there of 105,000 Soviet troops have brought Soviet military power 400 miles closer to the Persian Gulf, improving Moscow's military access to the entire region. At the same time, this use of naked military force has complicated

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Soviet relations with every country in South Asia and the gulf region and increased regional awareness of the Soviet threat.

**India and Pakistan** For more than 20 years the Soviet Union has capitalized on India's perceived security needs, as well as a convenient fit between the Soviet and Indian economies, to build what is perhaps Moscow's most important relationship with a non-Marxist state. In return, India has been attentive to Soviet interests, formally recognizing the Heng Samrin regime in Phnom Penh and avoiding public criticism of Soviet policy in Afghanistan. However, Soviet actions in Afghanistan have disturbed this arrangement to the extent that India has felt obliged to express its unhappiness with the continuing Soviet occupation of that country.

While close Indo-Soviet ties have been a valuable asset for India in its open difficult relations with Pakistan, Moscow has almost always tried to maintain a separate relationship and at least some influence with Islamabad largely independent of its ties with New Delhi. The invasion of Afghanistan has seriously hampered the Soviets in this regard. And if the Soviets had calculated that their presence in Afghanistan would make Pakistan more compliant to Moscow's will, they have discovered that their invasion has actually increased Islamabad's support in both the West and the Islamic world, enabling Pakistan to play a major role in the United Nations and elsewhere, undercutting Soviet efforts to consolidate their occupation.

**Iran and Iraq.** Afghanistan also has contributed to the erosion of Moscow's relations with the fundamentalist Islamic regime in Iran. After the hostage incident and the severing of Tehran's relations with Washington, the Soviets enjoyed the best opportunity in nearly a quarter century to improve their own position in this strategically important country. Nevertheless, their performance in Afghanistan, arms supplies to the Iraqis, their identification with the Communist Party of Iran, and familiar problems related to expulsion of Moscow's diplomats for espionage have all combined to place serious strains on the Soviet-Iranian bilateral relationship.

Iran remains, however, the most vulnerable place in the entire region for new Soviet inroads based upon exploitation of regional tensions and instability and the direct application of military force. Given the unpredictability of

events after the passing of Khomeini, as well as Iran's internal frictions and international isolation, the Soviets may find opportunities in the future, as they have found in the past, to interfere directly or through surrogates in Iranian affairs. Our own alienation from Tehran, Soviet proximity, and the dislike of all Iran's neighbors for the fundamentalist regime may make it very difficult to counter such Soviet moves or assist the Iranians in doing so.

The old Soviet game of exploiting conflict has not worked well to bolster its position in other areas of the gulf either. The Iraqis clearly are concerned about too great a dependence on the Soviets, despite their present need for Soviet arms. The moderate Arab states of the Persian Gulf have generally reacted to the Soviet invasion of a fellow Islamic nation and involvement in the Iran-Iraq conflict with concern. The major effect appears to have been to reaffirm the conviction by most of these countries that the Soviet Union must be denied access to their territory. Of all the Arabian Peninsula states facing the gulf, only Kuwait has diplomatic relations with the U.S.S.R.

True to form, the Soviets probably calculate that a continuation of the Iran-Iraq conflict—especially with no clear winner—would serve to weaken all regional states and make them more susceptible to Soviet manipulation. It keeps the Iraqis, dependent on Soviet arms, on a short leash and demonstrates to the Iranians that the U.S.S.R. is a force to be reckoned with. It also keeps the smaller Persian Gulf states uneasy and stimulates talk of a Soviet role in balancing forces in the region. This game carries some dangers for the Soviets, especially because of the unpredictability of Iran; but, on balance, turmoil serves Soviet purposes well. Perhaps this fact explains why Moscow and its allies are the primary arms suppliers to both belligerents.

#### Soviet Influence and U.S. Policy

I believe that this summary of Soviet policy in Asia and the Pacific demonstrates that, despite the dramatic increase of Soviet military capabilities throughout the area and undoubted capacity to exploit opportunities, Moscow's political influence with individual governments is very shallow, uneven, and imbalanced in the extreme. The situation varies from country to country, of course, and potentially short-term success stories such as the Soviet relationship with Vietnam are notable exceptions to the general rule. Never-

theless, there are serious weaknesses, as I have attempted to show, in the Soviet's ability to build and sustain long-term relationships in the region or to participate effectively in Asian political or economic arrangements. This is especially true in East Asia, where a community of interests—as yet mostly economic but fraught with lasting political significance—is quickly emerging. The Soviets and clients such as Vietnam are being left out of these developing relationships, while the United States and its closest allies in the area—Japan, Australia, and New Zealand—are very much a part of these trends.

The long-term injury to Soviet interests of this voluntary exclusion from the peaceful political and economic life of Asia should not be underestimated. It may not be impossible to imagine Moscow gaining some important tactical advantages—especially in use of Vietnamese facilities and exploitation of developments in the Iran-Iraq conflict—through further application of its familiar militaristic approach. But it is hard to see how the Soviets can achieve a meaningful permanent role in the rich economic and political life of most of this region without a fuller and richer diplomacy of their own. The longer the Soviets wait, the more difficult it will become for them to develop constructive and broad relationships with vital nations such as Japan, South Korea, Australia, New Zealand, or the members of the ASEAN grouping. Yet without such connections, Soviet influence in Asia is almost wholly dependent on military power, and this sort of influence—although significant—is very limited indeed.

It is limited first because military relationships last only as long as the tensions and conflicts which bring them into being, and Asia is one region where the trends are toward peace and stability and away from revolution and war. Moreover, it is limited because this Administration is determined that the Soviets shall not acquire the dominant military position in Asia that they seek. We challenge the Soviet right to military domination because we wish to live in peace. But we are confident that we and our allies throughout the region have the unity and resources to protect our interests and match Soviet military capabilities at any level Moscow may choose. The United States also realizes that, although every nation must provide for its own defense, we have a special responsibility as the only country which can counter the provocative Soviet

nuclear deployments aimed at our Asian allies and friends and, more importantly, the only nation which can negotiate with the Soviets for meaningful reductions.

We recognize, as well, our responsibility to maintain sufficient military power in the region to constrain Soviet adventurism and underline our commitment to remain an Asian power. In a decade, the strategic balance in military power has shifted from one of clear American superiority to one in which the balance has been described by senior military officers as too close to call. In this context, Asian and Pacific nations are closely watching U.S. intentions and performance in Asia to determine the extent of our long-term commitment to a major regional security role. Their risk/benefit analysis will be based on their perception of U.S. will and capacity to balance Soviet military power in their region at whatever levels Moscow chooses to maintain. Their perception of our willingness to do this is likely to be realistic and based on demonstrated U.S. efforts to enhance its strategic and conventional forces, as well as our security and economic assistance programs designed to assist them in attaining greater self-sufficiency.

This is even more so in the face of continued demonstrations of force by the U.S.S.R. throughout the area—in the continued assault on the people of Afghanistan, in the use of chemical weapons there and in Indochina, and in the wanton violation of international standards of morality in the civilian air corridors which crisscross the region. We are aware that if we permit the military balance in Asia and the Pacific to tip too far against the West, the U.S.S.R. will be able to convert armed force into political influence and dominance.

We do not intend to let this happen. Our firmness on this point is crucial because the very contrast between the successful Soviet military buildup and Moscow's political and economic failures may result in a greatly increased danger of military confrontation in the region if the U.S.S.R. concludes that force is successful and opts for even greater reliance on military intimidation as its principal geopolitical instrument. With this in mind, many of our Asian friends have indicated privately that the future peace of Asia rests on our commitment to balance the Soviet threat. We must maintain our determination and ability to do so if we are to continue to enjoy a situation in Asia favorable to U.S. interests.

But we also are mindful of where our real strengths in Asia reside. As important as our own military posture is, our strength is not in arms alone but in our cultural and political ties with Asia, the interdependence of the great Asia-Pacific trading community of which we are a part, and the bonds which a talented Asian-American citizenry have forged between the New World and some of the oldest and most sophisticated civilizations on earth.

Our own foreign policy in Asia is designed to develop these strengths into broad multifaceted relationships which will transcend considerations of tactical convenience and create a lasting community of common interests between the United States and the nations of Asia.

To give but one example, our still developing relationship with China is an event of momentous importance to both countries and to the stability of East Asia. We are, of course, aware of certain perspectives we share with the Chinese concerning Soviet activities in the region. We also recognize that a certain degree of cooperation in security matters could be natural and mutually beneficial as the relationship with China evolves. But the United States will

neither press this possibility nor make it the centerpiece of our bilateral contacts with Beijing simply because we wish that relationship to rest on a far broader, firmer foundation than a common reaction to Soviet policy. Instead, we will work for a balanced development of economic, political, and people-to-people contacts with China and encourage China's greater participation in the regional and international arrangements which we support. We are convinced that only such a far-sighted approach will sustain U.S.-Chinese ties over the long term. And such an approach should also provide an even better basis for security cooperation if that should seem desirable to both sides in the future.

This prescription is good medicine for our more traditional relationships in Asia and the Pacific as well. In fact, we have long since achieved such sophisticated and sensitive relations with many of our allies—Japan, the Republic of Korea, Australia, and New Zealand. With others—ASEAN; Pakistan; and our friends in the Pacific, South Asia, and the Gulf—we are well on the way to achieving these patterns of broadly based trust and common interest. Moreover, this constructive engagement is open to all others in the area who prefer peaceful political and economic interaction to the use of force against their neighbors.

If the Soviets persist in their present course in Asia, it is these ties which will ultimately sustain us and our friends and preserve our common welfare in the face of the challenge. If, on the other hand, the Soviets should ever decide to participate more fully in the peaceful political and economic life of Asia—of which they undeniably have a right to become a part—we will be equal to any degree of competition or cooperation they should care to undertake. ■

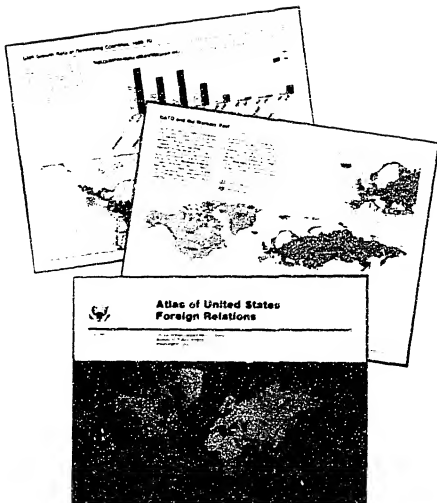
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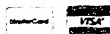
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